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# Crime of the Century

ROME

**O**n the weekend that Pope John Paul II elevated 28 men to cardinal — including the Archbishops of New York and Boston — prosecutor Ilario Martella brought to trial the second of the men who appear to have conspired to kill the Pope on orders of the K.G.B.

The man who fired the shot in 1981 that wounded the Pope, Mehmet Ali Agca, was convicted and threatened with incarceration in a jail where he would probably have been murdered by his former employers. He chose instead to sing and to stay in a safe jail, and his testimony is central in the current trial of Sergei Antonov, manager of the Bulgarian airline in Rome, who Agca says drove him to the site of the assassination attempt.

If a conviction persuades Mr. Antonov to cooperate as well, or if more information that implicates Bulgarian or Russian higher-ups is developed at this trial, most people will rightly interpret the results as the first judicial condemnation of an intelligence agency for plotting the murder of a world leader. In effect, the K.G.B. is on trial.

What makes this case even more disturbing is that the Bulgarian secret service — a servile appendage of the K.G.B. — undertook this murder attempt at a time that Yuri Andropov, later the leader of the Soviet Union and mentor of its present leader, was the K.G.B. boss. At the time, tyranny in Poland was threatened by Solidarity; the Polish Pope was the union's inspiration; therefore it was in Russia's interest to eliminate this Pope.

At first, this incredible case was ignored by most of the press, deprecated on background by our C.I.A. in Rome, and ridiculed by many in the West who did not want detente threatened. Suspicion of Russian involvement could be lived with, but proof of "the Bulgarian connection" in the crime would make it difficult for anyone to do business at summits with a Russian leader who had the Pope's blood on his hands.

That did not stop the investigating magistrate in Rome from following where the facts led. Like an Italian Sirica (a redundancy, but apt), Prosecutor Martella has plodded ahead, oblivious to political fallout, determined to show that no man, no group or no power can shoot a human being in St. Peter's Square with impunity.

Now attention is being paid. Five hundred journalists are here, trying to jam into "the Bunker" — the courtroom built to resist terrorists. Our C.I.A. here, probably on orders from Director William Casey, has wisely shut up; no longer are our spooks passing the word that the murder plot was too unprofessional to be K.G.B.-planned. (From the very start, it

## We no longer face the unfaceable

should be noted, former C.I.A. chief Richard Helms described the use of the Bulgarian agents to hire a terrorist in jail for this kind of job as "a classic K.G.B. operation.")

Nor can the Russians continue to remain aloof. Izvestia has been running a series, "Anatomy of a Provocation." Moscow has established a front group to discredit the findings of the Italian court: "On the initiative of the Soviet public," the editor of the literary journal Novy Mir, Vladimir Karpov, has formed a committee for the defense of Mr. Antonov.

Why has this story, so long untouched in the Soviet Union and so gingerly handled at first in the West, now gained front-page legitimacy? How come the Western and third-world press hordes are descending on the prosecutor's Bunker, and why is the standard Russian propaganda machine being wheeled into line to blur and distort the emerging truth?

Because the story is no longer a horror. Yuri Andropov, suspected of ordering the death of the Pope, is dead. We are now dealing with the past: only attempted murder, merely state-directed terrorism. Those are fit subjects for a public charge of conspiracy and the countercharge of provocation; they do not fiddle with the fuses of the future.

We are no longer facing what was to so many the unfaceable: what would have been the need to conduct a civilized diplomatic intercourse on matters like arms reduction with a man we were in the process of branding a state terrorist. The K.G.B.'s Andropov is gone, replaced by a man who could strike the pose of innocent and say "not on my watch."

Today it is safe to probe the conspiracy and popular to climb all over the story. No harm can come from the truth.

The Russians will claim that so long as no smoking gun is produced to link their former leader directly to the shooting, to suggest his complicity is a provocative slander.

The rest of the world will look to see if a clear link to the Bulgarians is established in court. If so, it will be as if the K.G.B. itself is convicted, and spy master Yuri Andropov will go down in history as the man who tried to perpetrate the crime of the century. □